



Aiming to make CDC nimble, agency director has rankled many

By MIKE STOBBE

NEW YORK (AP) — From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the top U.S. public health agency has been criticized as too slow to collect and act on new information.

Now, increasingly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is also being criticized for moving too fast.

One year into Dr. Rochelle Walensky's tenure as director, her bid to make the CDC more agile is being challenged by political pressures, vocal scientists and the changing virus itself. In its haste, some experts say, the agency has repeatedly stumbled — moving too quickly, before the science was clear, and then failing to communicate clearly with lo-

cal health officials and the public.

"I think they are absolutely trying to be more nimble — and that's a good thing. I don't criticize that," said Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association. "I criticize the fact that when you're doing this quickly, in an evolving environment, you can't just put it out there and think that people understand it."

Walensky has said that she came to the CDC thinking about ways to speed data collection and reporting. She once told The Associated Press that she didn't want the agency to spend months gathering data that gets published after it's useful. "Like, no one will care," she said.

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Continued from Front

Speaking to the AP last week, she said she was proud of what the agency had accomplished in the past year. Her examples included a torrent of CDC scientific reports, rapid identification of concerning vaccine side effects and quick research into new variants.

Among her particular points of pride: Last spring, the CDC was quick to investigate and report on rare but concerning side effects in some vaccine recipients, including an unusual blood clot in young women who had received Johnson & Johnson shots. The identification of about 15 cases — out of more than 8 million people who had gotten the vaccine — led the government to pause the dispensing of J&J shots for 11 days.

"Everyone has said that during a pandemic, CDC has to move faster," she said. "I think we really did that."

Her efforts, though, have sometimes gone awry:

— The agency's decision late last month to shorten isolation and quarantine caught many by surprise. Public confusion included questions such as whether

the guidance applied to children and why people didn't need to test negative before going back to their jobs.

— The CDC briefly overstated the omicron variant's penetration in the U.S. In mid-December, the agency estimated 73% of the previous week's coronavirus infections were due to omicron. A week later, the CDC shaved it to 23%, based on additional data. (The CDC turned out to be a week early: Omicron now reigns.)

— Last spring, Walensky said fully vaccinated people could stop wearing masks in many settings, only to reverse course as the then-new delta variant spread.

Walensky has many defenders. They say that in most cases, core decisions made sense at the time they were made. The real problem, they say, was with how they were rolled out and communicated.

'WE NEED TO DO AN OVERHAUL'

The CDC has long been considered the crown jewel of U.S. public health, with great minds working to investigate illness and coordinate national efforts

to prevent it. But it also has been repeatedly criticized as timid and slow in a crisis. Much of the problem has been lack of funding and governmental authority, said Shelley Hearne, a John Hopkins University professor of health policy and management. She noted, for example, that the CDC can't require doctors or states to report disease case counts or other vital information.

Walensky is not going to change that, Hearne said. "If the pandemic has shown anything, it's that we need to do an overhaul of how we protect our health," she said.

Compounding the problem is pressure on the CDC from both Republican and Democratic administrations to speak in harmony with the White House. That's not new, but there is now more second-guessing by other scientists and public health experts on social media.

And then there's the general fracturing of the nation. Some politicians and others have repeatedly undermined the CDC's message, said Benjamin, of the American Public Health Association. CDC directors "didn't

have this kind of mischief going on in the past," he said.

TOO SLOW

Early in 2020, the CDC was slow to send out test kits to help state labs identify the earliest coronavirus infections. The agency's kits had a design flaw and were contaminated.

CDC officials were initially focused on the risk of infections spreading from China and were slow to understand how much coronavirus was coming from Europe.

The agency also was criticized for being too slow to recommend people wear masks, to recognize that the virus can spread through the air and to ramp up systematic testing to detect new variants.

In 2020, the Trump administration was accused of political interference for working to control CDC messaging that might contradict the White House's portrayal of how the crisis was unfolding.

Walensky, an infectious-disease specialist known for her communications skills, vowed to restore public trust under President Joe Biden.

This week marks Walensky's

anniversary as CDC director, and the agency is still criticized as slow at times.

For example, the CDC last week updated its website to acknowledge N95 masks are more protective than other types and the better choice for most people — something that has long been obvious to scientists.

"So why has its guidance come out late time & time again?" Lawrence Gostin, a Georgetown University public health law expert, asked on Twitter.

On Wednesday, Biden defended the CDC, saying: "The messages, to the extent they've been confusing — it's because the scientists, they're learning more."

TOO FAST

Public health experts note the fast-changing pandemic has forced the CDC to reverse decisions that made sense at one point but later became problematic.

One example: For much of the pandemic, the CDC had advised Americans to wear masks when near others. But last spring, Walensky changed the guidance, saying fully vaccinated people could stop covering up in most settings. □

US researchers test pig-to-human transplant in donated body

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Researchers on Thursday reported the latest in a surprising string of experiments in the quest to save human lives with organs from genetically modified pigs.

This time around, surgeons in Alabama transplanted a pig's kidneys into a brain-dead man — a step-by-step rehearsal for an operation they hope to try in living patients possibly later

this year.

"The organ shortage is in fact an unmitigated crisis and we've never had a real solution to it," said Dr. Jayme Locke of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, who led the newest study and aims to begin a clinical trial of pig kidney transplants.

Similar experiments have made headlines in recent months as research into animal-to-human transplants

heats up.

Twice this fall, surgeons at New York University temporarily attached a pig's kidney to blood vessels outside the body of a deceased recipient to watch them work. And earlier this month, surgeons at the University of Maryland Medical Center gave a dying man a heart from a gene-edited pig that so far is keeping him alive.

But scientists still needed to learn more about how to test such transplants without risking a patient's life. With the help of a family who donated a loved one's body for science, Locke mimicked the way human organ transplants are done — from removing the pig "donor" kidneys to sewing them inside the deceased man's abdomen.

For a little over three days, until the man's body was removed from life support,

the pair of pig kidneys survived with no sign of immediate rejection, her team reported Thursday in the American Journal of Transplantation.

That was only one of several key findings. Locke said it wasn't clear if delicate pig kidney blood vessels could withstand the pounding force of human blood pressure — but they did. One kidney was damaged during removal from the pig and didn't work properly but the other rapidly started producing urine as a kidney should. No pig viruses were transmitted to the recipient, and no pig cells were found in his bloodstream. But Locke said the kidney experiment could have more far-reaching impact — because it shows that a brain-dead body can be a much-needed human model to test potential new medical treatments.

The research was conducted in September after Jim Parsons, a 57-year-old Alabama man, was declared brain-dead from a dirt bike racing accident.

After hearing this kind of research "had the potential to save hundreds of thousands of lives, we knew without a doubt that that was something that Jim would have definitely put his seal of approval on," said Julie O'Hara, Parsons' ex-wife.

The need for another source of organs is huge: While more than 41,000 transplants were performed in the U.S. last year, a record, more than 100,000 people remain on the national waiting list. Thousands die every year before getting an organ and thousands more never even get added to the list, considered too much of a long shot. □



At 113, NAACP evolves for relevance on racial justice agenda

By AARON MORRISON Associated Press

As the NAACP turns 113, look for its voice to grow louder on issues like climate change, the student debt crisis and the ongoing response to the coronavirus pandemic — while keeping voting rights and criminal justice reform at the forefront of its priorities.

The nation's oldest civil rights organization's birthday next month comes as it undergoes a restructuring to reflect a membership and leadership that is trending younger, to people in their mid-30s. As a result, it is adding endeavors like producing TV streaming content for CBS.

The hope is that younger Americans see the NAACP has modernized beyond being grandma and grandpa's go-to civil rights hub, good for much more than voter-registration drives and the star-studded Image Awards.

"We had to reinvigorate the organization," national president Derrick Johnson, 53, told The Associated Press.

"The changes that we have seen are absolutely necessary for the organization to exist for the next 112 or 113 years," he added. "But more importantly, we are more targeted in our work and are driven by outcomes as opposed to output."

The NAACP's legacy includes the legal desegregation of schools and workplaces, crusades against lynching and racial terrorism, and pursuit of socioeconomic advancement for Black Americans. It commands the respect of U.S. presidents and Capitol Hill powerbrokers, confers with U.N. diplomats on global issues and trains future leaders through its network of thousands of state and local branches.

But in periods of NAACP history when it found itself embroiled in financial hardship and internal power struggles, the group appeared ineffective or even irrelevant. Past critics have said the NAACP was insular, too concerned with corporate funding, and not



nearly nimble or progressive enough for the times.

"The best of the NAACP is when it fought for change, not as payback for Black people voting for a candidate, but because the change was demanded by the promises of the constitution, the demands of human rights and the sound morality of our deepest religious traditions," said the Rev. William Barber II, who led the North Carolina NAACP from 2006 to 2017 before resigning to become co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign.

"Right now, the NAACP should be leaning to its better history," Barber told the AP.

A revamped "brain trust" within its leadership is helping to better meet the needs of its membership, said NAACP chief strategy officer Yumeka Rushing. During a December national staff retreat, roughly half of those in attendance had come onboard in the prior 12 months.

"There is not another organization like us, in terms of the footprint that we have around the country," Rushing said.

"The restructuring happened at a time when the country needed us the most, to stand up and speak to the issues."

Johnson said there is no issue more important to the NAACP than the fight to enhance voter protections. With the Senate missing this

week's Martin Luther King Jr. Day deadline to pass Democrat-backed legislation, the NAACP president issued a grave warning to lawmakers of both parties. "Anything short of protecting the right to vote is a death sentence for democracy. The fight is far from over," Johnson said after a Wednesday night Senate vote.

Johnson told the AP the organization's strategy on voting rights isn't just about preserving Black voters' influence in national elections. Following the release of 2020 census data, the NAACP has filed lawsuits against state redistricting plans in Texas, Georgia and Illinois that would limit voters' choices in elections.

"It's more about having a true representative democracy," he said.

Until about a decade ago, it had been easier to find bipartisan support for voter protection measures. In a 2006 speech to the NAACP's national convention in Washington, former Republican President George W. Bush affirmed his support for Congress' reauthorization of the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965.

"President (Lyndon) Johnson called the right to vote the lifeblood of our democracy," Bush said. "That was true then, and it remains true today."

Paris Dennard, a spokesman for the Republican Na-

tional Committee, said the NAACP and the GOP have historically been aligned on several civil rights issues, including criminal justice reform, election integrity and financial support for historically Black colleges and universities.

"The NAACP is supposed to be nonpartisan, so we're always seeking areas of alignment on a host of issues," Dennard said.

Founded on Feb. 12, 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was formed as the nation struggled to build a post-abolition multiracial democracy amid violence against Black people. Its white founders, a group of activists and journalists that included Henry Moskowitz, Mary White Ovington and William English Walling, joined with like-minded Black activists — W. E. B. Du Bois, Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells, the noted journalist who investigated lynching in America.

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, founded as a part of the NAACP in 1940, litigated the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* mandating the desegregation of public schools in 1954, as well as a case permitting affirmative action in college admissions decades later. In 1957, the NAACP LDF became a separate entity.

Today, the NAACP has more than 2,200 branch-

es, including in colleges and prisons, and 2.2 million members. Even amid the rise in popularity of the Black Lives Matter movement, youth membership jumped significantly from 12,000 in 2019 to more than 17,000 by the end of 2020, according to Wisdom Cole, the NAACP's youth and college division director.

"The NAACP continues to be the preeminent civil rights organization in the country," said Randal Maurice Jelks, professor of African and African-American studies at the University of Kansas. "It set up a bureaucracy to be able to handle the ongoing, critical changes that we face."

When other organizations have burned out, the NAACP is well positioned to endure, Jelks said. "And that is to the credit of its initial organizers."

The NAACP operates two c3 nonprofits and two c4 nonprofits, as well as a for-profit arm. Its Hollywood bureau pursues representation and equity issues across the entertainment industry, while its legislative and policy bureau in Washington lobbies lawmakers on NAACP priorities. A full service law firm, staffed with seven attorneys, works with a network of lawyers across the country, allowing the organization to litigate between 30 and 50 cases at any given time.

With tens of millions of dollars in assets across its entities as of 2020, Johnson said the NAACP's finances are healthier than at any time in its existence.

Johnson said his involvement with the NAACP began in 1990. Until his 2017 appointment as president and CEO, he volunteered in his home state of Mississippi in a number of capacities, including as state conference president.

His elevation to leadership has not been without challenges. In 2020, a former North Carolina NAACP official filed a \$15 million lawsuit against the national organization after she accused her boss of sexual harassment and NAACP leadership of inaction. □

New approach to teaching race in school divides New Mexico

By CEDAR ATTANASIO Associated Press / Report for America

ALBUQUERQUE (AP) — A proposal to overhaul New Mexico's social studies standards has stirred debate over how race should be taught in schools, with thousands of parents and teachers weighing in on changes that would dramatically increase instruction related to racial and social identity beginning in kindergarten.

The revisions in the state are ambitious. New Mexico officials say they hope their standards can be a model for the country of social studies teaching that is culturally responsive, as student populations grow increasingly diverse.

As elsewhere, the move toward more open discussion of race has prompted angry rebukes, with some critics blasting it as racist or Marxist. But the responses also provide a window into how others are wrestling with how and when race should be taught to children beyond the polarizing debates over material branded as "critical race theory."

The responses have not broken down along racial lines, with Indigenous and Latino parents among those expressing concern in one of the country's least racially segregated states. While



debates elsewhere have centered on the teaching of enslavement of Black people, some discussions in New Mexico, which is 49% Hispanic and 11% Native American, have focused on the legacy of Spanish conquistadors.

"We refuse to be categorized as victims or oppressors," wrote Michael Franco, a retired Hispanic air traffic controller in Albuquerque who said the standards appeared aimed at categorizing children by race and ethnicity and undercutting the narrative of the American Dream.

The New Mexico Public Education Department's proposed standards are aimed at making civics, his-

tory, and geography more inclusive of the state's population so that students feel at home in the curriculum and prepared for a diverse society, according to public statements.

"Our out-of-date standards leave New Mexico students with an incomplete understanding of the complex, multicultural world they live in," Public Education Secretary Designate Kurt Steinhilber said. "It's our duty to provide them with a complete education based on known facts. That's what these proposed standards will do."

The plan calls for students to learn about different "identity groups" in kindergarten and "unequal power rela-

tions" in later grades. One part of the draft standards would require high school students to "assess how social policies and economic forces offer privilege or systemic inequity" for opportunities for members of identity groups. In a first for the state, ethnic studies and the history of the LGBT rights movement also would be introduced into the curriculum.

An Albuquerque pastor, Rev. Sylvia Miller-Mutia, welcomed the change in her written comment, arguing children see race early, and that learning about it in school can dismantle stereotypes early. When her eldest child was 3, she said that her Filipino dad wasn't

American because he has dark skin, while her mother was American because she has light skin.

"Already, a cultural script that said to be American is to be light-skinned had somehow seeped into my preschooler's consciousness," Miller-Mutia said in an interview.

Many Democratic-run states across the country are looking to diversify those cultural scripts, while Republican-run ones are putting up guardrails against possible changes. California was among the first states last year to make ethnic studies a graduation requirement. Texas passed a law requiring teachers to present multiple perspectives on all issues and one Indiana lawmaker proposed that teachers be required to take a "neutral" position.

The education department in New Mexico is reviewing over 1,300 letters on the proposed standards along with dozens of comments from an online forum in November. The standards were written with input from 64 people around the state, mostly social studies teachers, and are to be published next spring with revisions.

Among the authors was Wendy Leighton, a Santa Fe middle school history teacher. □

NCAA adopts new policy for transgender athletes

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — The NCAA has adopted a sport-by-sport approach for transgender athletes, bringing the organization in line with the U.S. and International Olympic Commit-

tees.

Under the new guidelines, approved by the NCAA Board of Governors on Wednesday, transgender participation for each sport will be determined

by the policy for the sport's national governing body, subject to review and recommendation by an NCAA committee to the Board of Governors.

When there is no national governing body, that sport's international federation policy would be in place. If there is no international federation policy, previously established IOC policy criteria would take over.

"Approximately 80% of U.S. Olympians are either current or former college athletes," NCAA President Mark Emmert said in a release. "This policy alignment provides consistency

and further strengthens the relationship between college sports and the U.S. Olympics."

The NCAA policy is effective immediately, beginning with the 2022 winter championships.

NCAA rules on transgender athletes returned to the forefront when Penn swimmer Lia Thomas started smashing records this year. She was on the men's team her first three years, but she is competing for the women this season after transitioning.

The Board of Governors is suggesting NCAA divisions allow for additional eligibility if a transgender

student-athlete loses eligibility based on the policy change.

That flexibility is provided they meet the NCAA's new guidelines.

"We are steadfast in our support of transgender student-athletes and the fostering of fairness across college sports," Georgetown President John DeGioia said in a release. "It is important that NCAA member schools, conferences and college athletes compete in an inclusive, fair, safe and respectful environment and can move forward with a clear understanding of the new policy." □



Austrian parliament approves universal vaccine mandate

VIENNA (AP) — Austria's parliament has voted to introduce a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for adults from Feb. 1, the first of its kind in Europe.

Lawmakers voted 137 to 33 Thursday evening to approve the mandate, which will apply to all residents of Austria aged 18 and over. Exempted from the mandate are pregnant women, individuals who for medical reasons can't be vaccinated, and people who have recovered from a coronavirus infection in the past six months.

Officials say the mandate is necessary because vaccination rates remain too low in the small Alpine country.

Chancellor Karl Nehammer's governing coalition worked with two of the three opposition parties in parliament on the plan to implement the mandate. It calls for the vaccine mandate to go into effect at the beginning of February, but enforcement will start in mid-March.

THIS IS A BREAKING NEWS UPDATE. AP's earlier story follows below.

VIENNA (AP) — Austria's parliament is due to vote Thursday on introducing a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for adults, the first of its kind in Europe.



The mandate drawn up by the government would apply to all residents of Austria age 18 and over, with exemptions for pregnant women, individuals who for medical reasons can't be vaccinated, and people who have recovered from a coronavirus infection in the past six months.

It appears assured of approval. Chancellor Karl Nehammer's governing coalition, made up of his conservative Austrian People's Party and the Greens, worked with two of the three opposition parties in parliament on the plan. The

other opposition party, the far-right Freedom Party, vehemently opposes it.

The plan is for the vaccine mandate to become law at the beginning of February. To start with, authorities will write to every household to inform them of the new rules.

From mid-March, police will start checking people's vaccination status during routine checks; people who can't produce proof of vaccination will be asked in writing to do so, and will be fined up to 600 euros (\$685) if they don't.

If authorities judge the

country's vaccination progress still to be insufficient, Nehammer says they would then send reminders to people who remain unvaccinated. If that still doesn't work, people would be sent a vaccination appointment and fined if they don't keep it. Officials hope they won't need to use the last measure. Fines could reach 3,600 euros if people contest their punishment and full proceedings are opened.

The mandate is supposed to remain in place until the end of January 2024. An expert commission will

report to the government and parliament every three months on vaccination progress. The government originally intended for the mandate to apply to all residents 14 and over, but changed that to 18 during consultations with political opponents and others.

The Austrian government announced the plan for a universal vaccine mandate at the same time it imposed a since-lifted lockdown in November and amid concern that Austria's vaccination rate was comparatively low for Western Europe. As of Wednesday, 71.8% of the population of 8.9 million was considered fully vaccinated.

"All experts believe that we will need high overall immunity in the population next fall as well," Health Minister Wolfgang Mueckstein said Sunday. "With this vaccine mandate, we will succeed in achieving these important additional percentage points in the vaccination rate." Some other European countries have introduced vaccine mandates for specific professional or age groups. Neighboring Germany is considering a mandate for all, but it's not yet clear whether, when and in what form that will go ahead. □

First aid flights arrive in Tonga after big volcano eruption

By **NICK PERRY Associated Press**

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — The first flights carrying fresh water and other aid to Tonga finally arrived Thursday after the Pacific nation's main airport runway was cleared of ash left by a huge volcanic eruption.

New Zealand and Australia each sent military transport planes that were carrying water containers, kits for temporary shelters, generators, hygiene supplies and communications equipment. The Australian plane also had a special sweeper to help keep the runway clear.



The deliveries were dropped off without the military personnel coming in contact with people at the airport in Tonga. That's because Tonga is desperate to make sure foreigners don't bring in the coronavirus. It has not had any outbreaks of COVID-19 and has reported just a single case since the pandemic began. Rear Adm. James Gilmour, the commander of New Zealand's Joint Forces, said there had been a "mammoth effort" by Tongan troops "to clear that runway by hand. And they've achieved that this afternoon."

Australia said the assistance would help Tonga's government meet the community's needs and support the

immediate cleanup efforts. Japan also said it is sending emergency relief, including drinking water and equipment for cleaning away volcanic ash. Two C-130 Hercules aircraft left Thursday evening, and a transport vessel carrying two CH-47 Chinook helicopters will depart as soon as it is ready, the Defense Ministry said.

Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi told reporters that his ministry "will do everything we can for the disaster-hit people of Tonga."

U.N. humanitarian officials report that about 84,000 people more than 80% of Tonga's population have been impacted by the volcano's eruption, U.N. spokesman Stéphane Du-

jarric said, pointing to three deaths, injuries, loss of homes and polluted water. Communications with Tonga remain limited after Saturday's eruption and tsunami appeared to have broken the single fiber-optic cable that connects Tonga with the rest of the world. That means most people haven't been able to use the internet or make phone calls abroad, although some local phone networks are still working.

One phone company, Digicel, said Thursday it had managed to restore the ability to make international calls from some places by using a satellite link, but that people would need to be patient due to high demand. □

Cut off by volcano, Tongans relieved as contact restored

By **DAVID RISING** Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — As the massive undersea Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha'apai volcano erupted on Saturday, Tongans from around the world gazed on as their relatives livestreamed images of billowing clouds of ash, gas and steam emerging from beneath the depths. Then darkness.

The eruption severed Tonga's single fiber-optic cable, rendering the entire Pacific archipelago offline and unable to communicate with the rest of the world and leaving their loved ones terrified about what might have happened.

"It was absolutely crazy," said Koniseti Liutai, a Tongan who lives in Australia. "We were talking with family and relatives, because they were excitedly showing us the volcano's activities, then we heard the explosion and the big bang and everything went dark," he said. "Then the next information we got was the tsunami warning and then the tsunami hitting; we were all absolutely fearing the worst."



It wasn't only family and friends who could not get through. Huge ash clouds made backup communication by satellite phone next to impossible, and world leaders were not even able to get in touch with their Tongan counterparts to see what help they needed.

As the ash cleared, satellite communication improved and Tonga's telecoms operator, Digicel, said it had been able to restore international call services to some areas late Wednesday.

It cautioned, however, that due to the high number of calls and the limited capacity of its satellite link that

people may need to try repeatedly to get through something experienced by Liutai, who is deputy president of the Tonga Australia Chamber of Commerce.

"My first direct information was this morning," he said Thursday. "My daughter, after 100 phone calls during the day and night, got through to my aunts, my mum's sisters, and we were in tears of joy it was three in the morning, but for us it was like the middle of the day; we were so pumped and so happy."

So far, three people have been confirmed killed after the volcanic eruption 64 kilometers (40 miles) north of Tonga's capital, Nuku'alofa,

and the tsunami that followed. Several small settlements in outlying islands were wiped off the face of the map, according to the Red Cross and official reports, necessitating the evacuation of several hundred residents.

With the resumption of some communications, more photos have begun to emerge of the destruction, showing the once-verdant islands turned a charcoal black by a thick coating of volcanic dust. Coastlines are strewn with debris, while people work to clean streets and walkways.

The 2-centimeter (0.78 inch) layer of ash that

rendered the runway at Fua'amotu International Airport unusable has now been cleared, and the first flights carrying fresh water and other aid arrived Thursday. A repair ship is being sent from Papua New Guinea to work on the undersea cable, but it will take some time to get to Tonga and the company in charge estimates it could take longer than a month to repair the line.

Given that the cable runs right through the volcanic zone, any new volcanic activity could completely scupper even that timeline. For Liutai, who runs a business in Tonga, regular visits had allowed him to stay in close touch in the past, but with COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions, he has come to rely on video calls like many other Tongans living abroad.

With that possibility now cut off, at least for the near future, he's hoping at least better telephone connections will soon be available so that the 106,000 residents of Tonga can better reach the outside world to tell their friends and family what's going on. □

Barbados PM sworn in after 2nd consecutive elections sweep

Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP)

— Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley was sworn in for a second term Thursday after her party appeared to have swept every legislative seat in the first elections the island nation held as a republic since casting off the British monarchy.

Mottley's Barbados Labor Party seemed to have secured all 30 seats in the House of Assembly, the lower house of the island's Parliament, giving the island's first female leader a second term as prime minister. A majority of 16 seats was required for a win.

Mottley achieved the same sweep when her party won elections in 2018.

"The people of this na-

tion have spoken with one voice, decisively, unanimously and clearly," she said in her celebratory speech before dawn on Thursday to a large crowd clad in red shirts.

Mottley, who pledged to focus on issues including financial security, nutrition, renewable energy projects and housing, said the island faces serious challenges in the next 10 to 15 years.

She noted that Barbados, an island of more than 300,000 people that has reported more than 37,000 confirmed infections of the new coronavirus, is still fighting the pandemic that has battered the economy and tourism sector of the one of the Caribbean's wealthier nations. □

Vaccines to Africa must have good shelf lives, says expert

By **CHINEDU ASADU** Associated Press

ABUJA, Nigeria (AP)

— At least 2.8 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines donated to African countries have expired, the Africa Centers for Disease Control said Thursday, citing short shelf lives as the major reason.

Donors of vaccines to the continent should send them with a realistic shelf life of about "three months to six months" before their expiration, Africa CDC director John Nkengasong told an online briefing. More African nations are now refusing to accept donations of vaccines that have only one or two months before their expiration, he said.

Although the number

of expired doses is only about 0.5% of the total number donated to Africa, Nkengasong said he is unhappy to see any become invalid.

"Any dose of vaccine that expired pains me because that is a life that can potentially be saved," Nkengasong said.

Just over 10% of Africa's population of 1.3 billion people are fully vaccinated, he said. The continent's 54 countries have confirmed 10.4 million COVID-19 cases and 235,000 deaths. The continent's omicron wave appears to be receding, with new confirmed cases down by 20% from the previous week and deaths dropping by 8%, the World Health Organization's Af-

rica office announced Thursday.

More than 60% of the 572 million vaccine doses African countries have received have already been administered, Nkengasong said. The "big fight" for African countries will be "logistics and getting doses to the population even as more supplies arrive," he said.

"We've seen remarkable uptake of vaccines in settings where we engage the community ... and religious leaders," Nkengasong said, urging countries to use innovative ways to "bring vaccines to the population and not only require that the populations should go to where the vaccines are." □

Ontario to lift lockdown on dining rooms and gyms

By ROB GILLIES

TORONTO (AP) — Canada's largest province is ending a lockdown of restaurant dining rooms, gyms and cinemas at the end of the month.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford said Thursday they will be allowed to reopen Jan. 31 with 50% capacity.

The province locked down again on Jan. 5, unlike U.S. cities and states. Like the U.S., Ontario saw record new infections.

Ford said hospitalizations are starting to slow and officials expect cases of the



ultra-contagious omicron variant to peak this month.

"We can be confident the worst is behind us, Ford said. "We're going to very cautiously open up."

Health Minister Christine Elliott said non-emergency surgeries won't resume until ICU occupancy and hospitalizations go down. She said officials expect those to peak in the first or second week of February.

Sporting arenas and concert venues will be limited to 500 spectators on Jan. 31, but limits are to be eased on Feb. 21. □

US: Swift, severe response if Russia sends troops to Ukraine

By MATTHEW LEE and FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned Thursday that there would be a "swift, severe" response from the United States and its allies if Russia sends any military forces into Ukraine.

Blinken's comments in Berlin appeared to be another effort to clear up any confusion about the position of the U.S. and its NATO allies after U.S. President Joe Biden was heavily criticized for saying a "minor incursion" by Russia would elicit a lesser response.

"If any Russian military forces move across the Ukrainian border and commit new acts of aggression against Ukraine, that will be met with a swift, severe, united response from the United States and our allies and partners," Blinken told a news conference with his German counterpart.

Later, Blinken accused Russia of threatening the foundations of world order with its buildup of an estimated 100,000 troops near Ukraine. He said Russia must face a concerted and severe global response if it invades.

The stark warning was delivered in Berlin, the city that symbolized the Cold War split between East and West, as Blinken prepares to meet Friday in Geneva with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in a high-stakes bid to ease tensions that ap-

pears likely to fail.

"These are difficult issues we are facing, and resolving them won't happen quickly," Blinken said. "I certainly don't expect we'll solve them in Geneva tomorrow."

He said Russia's actions toward Ukraine are an attempt to subvert international norms and just the latest in a string of Moscow's violations of numerous treaties, agreements and other commitments it has made to respect the sovereignty and territory of other countries.

"To allow Russia to violate those principles with impunity would drag us all back to a much more dangerous and unstable time, when this continent — and this city — were split in two, separated by no-man's-lands patrolled by soldiers, with the threat of all-out war hanging heavily over everyone's lives," Blinken told an audience at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences. "It would also send a message to others around the world that these principles are expendable."

"We will not treat the principles of sovereignty or territorial integrity as negotiable," he said, adding that the situation is "bigger than a conflict between two countries, and it's bigger than a clash between Russia and NATO. It's a crisis with global consequences. And it requires global at-

tention and action."

The speech came after Blinken and top diplomats from Britain, France and Germany met in Berlin to project a united front over concerns that Russia may be planning to invade Ukraine. A day earlier, he met Ukraine's president in Kyiv.

Biden said Wednesday he thinks Moscow will invade and warned Russian President Vladimir Putin that his country would pay a "dear price" in lives lost and a possible cutoff from the global banking system if it does.

But Biden also prompted consternation among allies after saying the response to a Russian invasion "depends on what it does." "It's one thing if it's a minor incursion and then we end up having a fight about what to do and not do, et cetera," he said.

Biden said Thursday that "Russia has a long history of using measures other than overt military action to carry out aggression — paramilitary tactics, so-called gray zone attacks and actions by Russian soldiers not wearing Russian uniforms." Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was among those expressing concern about Biden's "minor incursion" remark.

"We want to remind the great powers that there are no minor incursions and small nations. Just as there are no minor casualties and

little grief from the loss of loved ones," he tweeted.

Blinken took pains Thursday to stress the U.S. and its partners were united, noting that American diplomats have held more than 100 meetings with allies in recent weeks "to ensure that we are speaking and acting together with one voice when it comes to Russia."

"That unity gives us strength, a strength I might add that Russia does not and cannot match," he said. "It's why we build voluntary alliances and partnerships in the first place. It's also why Russia recklessly seeks to divide us."

Russia denies it is planning an invasion and, in turn, accused the West of plotting "provocations" in Ukraine, citing the delivery of weapons to the country by British military transports in recent days.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova alleged Ukrainian and Western talk of an imminent Russian attack was a "cover for staging large-scale provocations of their own, including those of military character."

Russia wants binding security guarantees, including a permanent prohibition on Ukrainian membership in NATO, to which Kyiv aspires, and the removal of most of the U.S. and allied military presence in eastern Europe.

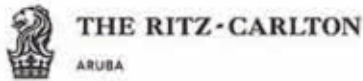
The U.S. and its European partners say they are willing

to consider certain less-dramatic gestures but that the Russian demands are out of the question and that Putin knows they are nonstarters. That, Blinken said, is proof of Putin's ulterior motive.

"So far, our good-faith gestures have been rebuffed — because, in truth, this crisis is not primarily about weapons or military bases," he said. "It's about the sovereignty and self-determination of Ukraine and other post-Soviet states. And at its core, it's about Russia's rejection of a post-Cold War Europe that is whole and free."

Russia on Thursday announced sweeping naval maneuvers through February, some apparently in the Black Sea, involving over 140 warships and more than 60 aircraft. Separately, Spain's defense minister said the country was sending two warships to the Black Sea with NATO approval.

Amid concerns that Putin may not be moved by threats of sanctions and that an invasion will not draw as strong an international response as the U.S. believes is warranted, Blinken made a direct appeal to the Russian people to oppose any intervention. "You deserve to live with security and dignity, like all people everywhere, and no one — not Ukraine, not the United States, not the countries of NATO — is seeking to jeopardize that. □



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My Point of View: True Aruba Kindness

By: Jan Fearnow from Ocala, Florida

We visit Aruba a lot and since we are renting a house, (from the wonderful family that owns Universal Restaurant) we don't get the paper like we do when we stay at our timeshares at La Cabana, but we love reading it online. Over the 20+ years my husband and I have been coming here to this beautiful, peaceful island we have made so many friends. Families, single people, older people, waitresses, waiters, bartenders, restaurant managers, the list goes on and on. The great thing is that we keep in touch. Some bring

their children to our house here to swim in the pool, have a cook out, and this year we spent Christmas with them. We even call them our adopted children and grandchildren and it brings us great pleasure.

Aruban kindness

Yesterday, I had the unfortunate to revisit ARC (wonderful clinic). My husband had returned to the state due to business and my pain was so bad I knew I could not drive, I texted one of our young mothers to see if she could help. She was at work, but immediately explained to her manager what was hap-

pening and was told for her to go now. Not only could the manager have said no, but they were kind enough to let her come and help me immediately. True Aruba Kindness. This lady came to the house picked me up, stayed with me at the clinic, brought me back home, went and obtained my prescriptions, brought me soup and continued to check on me throughout the day. She alerted other friends who contacted me and said they would do whatever I needed. This included our landlord who would bring it to me or have it delivered. Again, True Aruba Kindness.



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pening and was told for her to go now. Not only could the manager have said no, but they were kind enough to let her come and help me immediately. True Aruba Kindness. This lady came to the house picked me up, stayed with me at the clinic, brought me back home, went and obtained my prescriptions, brought me soup and continued to check on me throughout the day. She alerted other friends who contacted me and said they would do whatever I needed. This included our landlord who would bring it to me or have it delivered. Again, True Aruba Kindness.

It grew later in the night and I wondered why I had not heard from anyone, but they have families of their own so I figured they were busy getting the children to bed, etc. I knew my husband was busy with our businesses so I thought he would just call later or send me a fast email to let me know all was good and we would speak the next morning. Little did I know that somehow my phone had went to air plane mode so I could not receive anything. Suddenly there is a knock on my front door and I could see a person through the blind on my window. How can this be happening? I have an 8 ft fence around the house the garage door is down tight, and all the gates are closed and locked. I ask "who is it?" My friend said "it's me are you ok?" I open the door asking "how did you get in?" After her telling me my husband was worried sick because he couldn't reach me he ask if there was any way she could check on me.

She had driven to my house immediately, drove her car as close to the fence as she could, jumped on the hood, sprang over the fence to the garbage can and jumped down to the ground. ONCE AGAIN, ARUBA KINDNESS.

After we fixed my phone and we assured my husband I was ok, had not passed out, etc. I let her out the front gate and thanked her a thousand time. That my friends it what the people and businesses are all about in Aruba. Taking care of people you have come to know, love and treat them like family.

Because that is what they truly are while you are in Aruba. YOUR ARUBA FAMILIES, FRIENDS FILLED WITH ARUBA KINDNESS

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Official Hand-over of solar panels to Colegio Cristo Rey**

ORANJESTAD - Aruba Airport Authority N.V.'s (AAA) "Wings of Hope" (WoH) officially hands-over solar panels to Colegio Cristo Rey as the winner of the 1st ever Energy Champion Competition.

As part of WoH's Affordable and Clean Energy Goal,

Colegio Cristo Rey was officially announced as the winner back in 2021 of the 1st ever Energy Champion Competition and received AWG 20,000.00 to execute their energy reduction plan which included the installation of solar panels. In the presence of AAA's CEO Joost Meijjs, WoH

workgroup represented by AAA's Armand Kelly, Christine Kaarsbaan-Leo, Keyli Vrolijk, Selkys Winterdaal and Angeline Flemming, Colegio Cristo Rey's team and Ms. Baly from SKOA, the solar panels were officially handed over. With this installation, Colegio Cristo Rey is looking towards reducing their yearly energy consumption by 20%.

WoH's competition was also held to raise awareness and spark curiosity among students and teachers on sustainable initiatives. After a successful 1st competition, WoH is proud to announce that there will be a second competition focused on United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This year's competition will be open for primary and secondary schools to participate in, where each school will need to present their sustainable plan by choosing one or more of the SDGs as their goal. The winner of this year's competition will receive AWG 20,000.00 to execute their sustainable plan.

WoH looks forward to continue including students and the Aruban Community in projects, and in doing so creating awareness on the importance of sustainable practices whilst encouraging all to embrace changes that create a better and more sustainable future for all. □



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How it all began

It was 1938 when Mr. Eric Ponson started his journey at General Store. Ponson did not hesitate and decided to buy General Store. Buying a store and thus going from employee to owner of a business with a debt of 11.000 guilders was not an easy task.

As the saying goes: "Behind every successful man, is a strong woman". In the case of Ponson, this was no different. As General Store progressed and slowly became successful, Mrs. Irene Ponson, came in to assist her husband. Irene Ponson is a visionary, she knew exactly where and how to invest and within a short amount of time in 1970, General Store moved to a better location at the Steenweg. This aloud for a lot more merchandize, products and employees. Supply and demand was as such, that General Store became the number 1 electrical business. The place where you went to find bulbs, cables, outlets or any other electrical equipment you needed. Business kept going so well that the location at the Steenweg became too small and was moved later to Dakota Shopping Paradise and lat-

er to Pedro Gallego Straat. With this move, an expansion was decided upon and an electronics store in Savaneta was opened. General Store still being very successful was ready for more growth.

Ricky, Kenneth, Corine and Frans are the fruits of this marriage. They worked at their parent's side every day until they were ready to go abroad to study. In was in their backyard that all containers were stalled. This is why all four children know everything there is to know about the business. Kenneth and Frans however, decided to further develop their father's legacy and continued with their mother's dream to expand the business. An expansion not in square feet only, but in merchandize as well. A great opportunity presented itself when the Ponson family was able to buy a piece of property across from the airport. In 2007 the Ponson family moved into their brand new and huge building. Ponson's General Store now had an electrical department, as housewares department, a paint department and a hardware department.

After a successful opening and expansion, Kenneth and Frans who inherited their mothers vision, decided General Store was ready for yet another expansion. Together with investors a visibility report was drafted, which resulted in Noord being a very good location for another store. The search for a well located property commenced.



Soon after the purchase, with the support of Mr. Tom Barfell and management of Do it Best in the States, the construction of Do it Center commenced. Mrs. Claudia Ponson, Kenneth his wife, was the mastermind behind the interior decoration, making sure the interior of the store was according the Do it Best guidelines.

Fast forward to today. A Do it Center in Aruba, with more than 50.000 top of the line items for interior as well exterior use, building materials, STO products and a top of the line grocery store. Perseverance, responsibility, vision and the courage to invest have made Ponson's General Store as successful as it is today.

Super Do It Center Shaba & Groceries

Located in Shaba, Noord. This is the last sibling of the Do It Center family. Here you will be able to find anything you are looking for. The building is divided into several departments from home to hardware to groceries. Everything under one roof.

Groceries? Visit the fully stocked supermarket with fresh fruits and vegetables and high class meat selections. Highly known products and brands are here

for you to grab. Every week Do It Center Groceries offers you great discount on selected items. Weekly specials are very popular and a perfect chance for you to buy your favorite products at a reduced price.

Need a home makeover? Do not skip the furniture department "Leenbakker". Here, you will find a divine collection of European furniture, worldwide known for their modern and stylish features for your bedroom, bathroom, living room or kitchen. For your garden they have a wide selection of durable furniture specially made for our tropical climate. Take a walk around and find some treasures. Find the perfect accessory for your house, fitted for your personality and style. Modern, elegant, retro industrial, whatever your style is you will definitely find something for your personal taste.

Feeling hungry? Take a break and relax at the 'Deli'. Savor a delicious lunch or a sandwich with a cup of coffee or perhaps a wrap. If you are a sweet tooth you will not be able to just skip the great variety

of desserts they have. So tempting!

Do it Center Shaba is open from Mon to Sat from 8AM to 8PM and closed on Sunday

Do It Center Camacuri

Do it Center Camacuri as mentioned before was the first official building of the Do It Center family. After serving the community for many years as a multipurpose facility this was recently transformed to a department specially designated for contractors services only. Open from Mon to Fri from 7.30AM to 6PM. On Sat from 7.30AM- 4PM and closed on Sunday.

Do It Center Savaneta

This location is the baby of the family. Here you will also be able to find everything for your home and garden and building materials to build or renovate your home. Just drive into the 'Lumber Drive-Thru' and the experts will help you with everything you need. Open from Mon to Fri from 8AM to 6PM, SAT, 10AM-4PM and closed on Sunday. For more information go to www.doit.aw. □

Do it Center



Amazon heads to the mall with prototype clothing store

NEW YORK (AP) — First, Amazon competed with malls. Now, it's moving inside one. The online retailing giant said Thursday that it plans to open a clothing store in a Southern California mall later this year. It's the latest foray into brick-and-mortar for Amazon, which already sells more than 10% of all clothes in the U.S.

The store, which will sell women's and men's clothing as well as shoes and other accessories, will open at Americana at Brand, a mall in Glendale, California. The entry into malls could become another threat to traditional clothing sellers because of the data and shopper insights Amazon may gain, experts say.

Amazon says its algorithms will spit out real-time recommendations as shoppers keep scanning items that they see. Shoppers can also fill out an online survey of their preferences for style and fit.

The store will be about 30,000 square feet, similar in size to a Kohl's, but about one-third the size of other department stores



like Macy's. However, it will offer more than double the number of styles as traditional stores do because only one of each piece of clothing will be on display, with the rest in the back room. Items are chosen by Amazon curators who also use feedback provided by millions of customers shopping on Amazon.com.

Simoina Vasen, managing director of Amazon Style, declined to comment on rollout plans of the new store concept or sales pro-

jections. Amazon didn't give a precise date for the opening of the Glendale store.

Amazon unseated Walmart as the largest clothing seller last year during the pandemic as more people began shopping online.

Wells Fargo forecast in March that Amazon's clothing and footwear sales in the U.S. increased by about 15% in 2020 to more than \$41 billion. That's about 20% to 25% above Walmart and 11% to 12% share of all

clothing sold in the U.S.

Amazon has been making a big push into fashion in recent years through its own labels and in September 2020, it launched an online shop called Luxury Stores. Shoppers at the Amazon Style store can browse items on display and scan a QR code to see sizes, colors and customer ratings. Shoppers can send items to fitting rooms or directly to the store's counter. Once in a fitting room, customers can request other items us-

ing a touchscreen.

"Amazon Style completely reimagines what's possible in the fitting room, turning it into a personalized space where customers can continue to shop a seemingly endless closet of great styles," Vasen wrote in an Amazon blog.

Neil Saunders, managing director of GlobalData Retail, said the prototype store could deepen Amazon's influence in the sector, especially among clothing shoppers who love the experience of exploring and browsing physical stores. And it could empower Amazon with more shopping data.

But he also cautioned that Amazon's success depends on execution.

"Traditionally, it is not all that good at creating a great in-store experience," said Saunders. "It tends to be very solid at technology and operations but can fall short on spirit and soul — both of which are particularly important in fashion where consumers love inspiration, curation, and personal services." □

Rising inflation tightens squeeze on consumers

By DAMIAN J. TROISE AP Business Writer

Retail sales took an unexpected dip in December in what could be a signal that persistently rising inflation is prompting a pullback in consumer spending.

Consumers paid more for everything from groceries to cars in 2021 as companies passed along the costs of pricier raw materials and supply chain delays. Spending remained strong thanks to pent-up demand throughout the year, despite the rising costs and longer waits for big-ticket items like cars and furniture. Pressure from inflation has been building, though, as have concerns that consumers will eventually pull-back on spending as they tire of higher prices hitting their wallets with no relief in sight.

Too much shouldn't be read into one report, said Jeff Buchbinder, equity

strategist for LPL Financial. "But it does highlight that the stakes are high in the battle against inflation with higher prices eroding purchasing power.

Persistently rising inflation has made goods more expensive all around, therefore cutting purchasing power by making people stretch their dollars more for the same items.

Retail sales fell 1.9% in December, a key month in the holiday shopping season for many retailers. Economists expected a break-even month, owing to the increased spending by consumers in November as businesses warned about product shortages and shipping delays early in the holiday season.

Retail sales haven't fallen by that much since early in 2021 and the drop this time occurred in the same month that inflation spiked in several measures.

"We had a lot of momentum the last time we spoke with you heading into December," Abercrombie & Finch CEO Fran Horowitz told investors in a recent financial update. "But as receipts flowed, we just did not have the inventory to keep up with demand."

The clothing company joined several others in early January warning that inflation and supply chain problems would crimp financial forecasts, including paint maker Sherwin-Williams and medical products maker Cardinal Health. The Labor Department reported that inflation jumped at its fastest pace in nearly 40 years, when compared with a year earlier. The consumer price index had already been steadily rising throughout 2021 as a surge in demand far outpaced supply for many raw materials and goods. Used car prices soared more than



37%, furniture prices rose 14% and everything from groceries to gas also rose. Businesses, faced with higher costs that threatened their profits, have been raising prices with the expectation that people will pay without shifting their habits too much. That helped profit margins surge in 2021 to their highest levels in more than a decade, but companies are now warn-

ing investors that higher costs are dulling some of their financial forecasts.

Prices at the wholesale level surged by a record 9.7% for all of 2021, setting an annual record.

"December was a rough month for the American consumer," said Anu Gagar, global investment strategist for Commonwealth Financial Network. □

CROSSWORD

By THOMAS JOSEPH

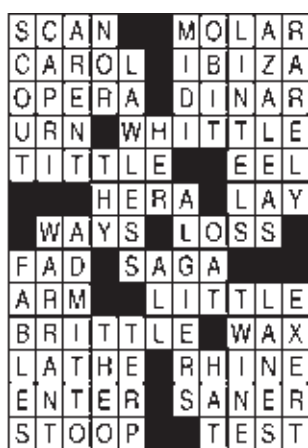
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- 36 Un- escorted
1 Docs for dogs
5 Game callers
9 Steer clear of
11 Wonderland visitor
13 "Keen!"
14 Reef material
15 Wrap up
16 Starting bids
18 Marks of shame
20 Here, in Quebec
21 Condescending look
22 Pants part
23 Lasso on TV
24 Cambridge sch.
25 Some cheers
27 Coffee bar order
29 Vein contents
30 Carnival workers
32 German warning
34 Like jazz cats
35 Church singers

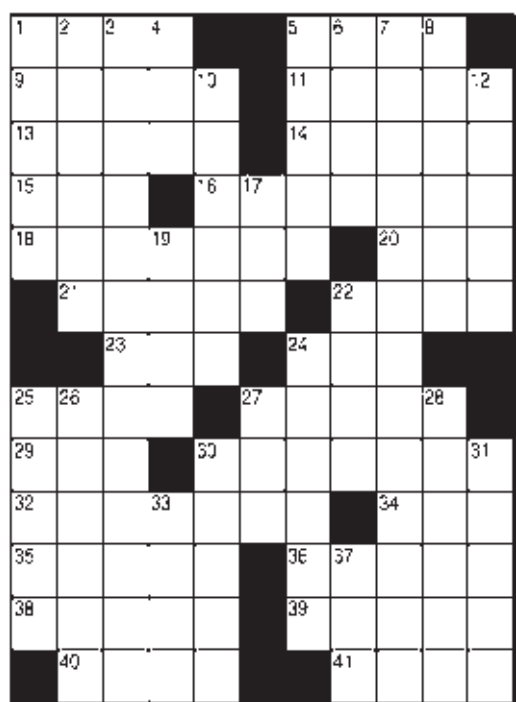
- 38 Writer Keller
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DOWN

- 1 Wind indicators
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6 Musk of Tesla
7 Miner's pre-blast cry
8 Uncommon
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17 Golf goal
19 Turns right
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24 One of the Earps
25 Kitchen pest
26 Tell, for one
27 Supply with crew
28 Fight sites
30 Singes
31 Used up
33 Even
37 Depressed



Yesterday's answer



1-21

A XYDLBAAXR
is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

1-21

CRYPTOQUOTE

Q E R V I T G M I V L V M R M Z

S R Z S I L M V S S N I T E R Z M U S R

W L W I S N D Z W Z E M R K M I

Q E R V R S L L. — U S R F E D L

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: IF YOU GIVE TO A THIEF, HE CANNOT STEAL FROM YOU, AND HE IS THEN NO LONGER A THIEF — WILLIAM SAROYAN

How sweeping EU rules would curb tech companies



By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — Online companies would have to ramp up efforts to keep harmful content off their platforms and take other steps to protect users under rules that European Union lawmakers approved Thursday.

The 27-nation bloc has gained a reputation as a trendsetter in the growing global push to rein in big tech companies facing withering criticism over misinformation, hate speech and other harmful content on their platforms.

Here's a look at the draft EU rules, known as the Digital Services Act, and why they would make an impact:

WHAT IS THE DIGITAL SERVICES ACT?

The legislation is part of a sweeping overhaul of the European Union's digital rules aimed at ensuring online companies, including tech giants like Google and Facebook parent Meta, protect users on their platforms and treat rivals fairly. It's an update of the EU's two-decade-old e-commerce directive.

"The Digital Services Act could now become the new gold standard for digital regulation, not just

in Europe but around the world," the lead EU lawmaker on the bill, Christel Schaldemose, said during a debate Wednesday. "Big tech nations like the U.S. or China are watching closely to see what we're now going to agree."

The proposals are one-half of flagship digital regulations drafted by the bloc. EU lawmakers also are working on the Digital Markets Act, which is aimed at reigning in the power of the biggest online "gatekeepers."

Both will face further negotiations with EU member countries before taking effect.

Getting the Digital Services Act through the EU Parliament is "a huge step in tackling the social problems caused by online platforms," said Zach Meyers, a senior research fellow at the Centre for European Reform think tank.

Similar efforts are underway in the U.S., but there are deep divisions between Republicans who criticize platforms for censoring their views and Democrats who slam them for failing to act.

"If EU member-states reach agreement with Parliament in the coming months, the

EU will show a way that other democracies can reconcile these different political interests," Meyers said.

WHAT WILL IT COVER?

The Digital Services Act includes a raft of measures aimed at better protecting internet users and their "fundamental rights online." Tech companies would be held more responsible for content on their platforms, with requirements to beef up flagging and removal of illegal content like hate speech or dodgy goods and services sold online like counterfeit sneakers or unsafe toys.

To address worries that takedown notices would infringe on freedom of speech, lawmakers added safeguards to ensure they're handled in a "non-arbitrary and non-discriminatory manner," the EU Parliament said.

Online platforms would have to be more transparent about their algorithms that recommend the next video to watch, product to buy or news item at the top of people's social media feeds. So-called recommender systems have been criticized for leading people to more increasingly extreme or polarizing content.

The biggest platforms would have to give users at least one option for recommendations not based on profiling.

There are also measures to ban platforms from using "dark patterns" — deceptive techniques to nudge users into doing things they didn't intend to — as well as requiring porn sites to register the identities of users uploading material.

ARE THERE ANY CONTROVERSIAL POINTS?

One of the legislation's biggest battles was over surveillance-based advertising, also known as targeted or behavioral advertising. Such ads would be banned for children but not prohibited outright. A full ban had faced fierce resistance from the digital ad industry dominated by Google and Meta. □

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24/7

What does it mean for COVID-19 to be endemic?

AP Medical Writer

Some European countries such as Spain are making tentative plans for when they might start treating COVID-19 as an "endemic" disease, but the World Health Organization and other officials have warned that the world is nowhere close to declaring the pandemic over. A look at what endemic means and the implications for the future.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR A DISEASE TO BE ENDEMIC AS OPPOSED TO PANDEMIC?

Diseases are endemic when they occur regularly in certain areas according to established patterns, while a pandemic refers to a global outbreak that causes unpredictable waves of illness.

The World Health Organization has said that redefining the coronavirus as an endemic disease is still "a ways off," according to Catherine Smallwood, an infectious diseases expert in the agency's European headquarters in Copenhagen, Denmark. "We still have a huge amount of uncertainty and a virus that is evolving quickly," she said earlier this month.

For many countries, designating a disease as endemic means that fewer resources will be available to combat it, since it will likely no longer be considered a public health emergency.

WHO WILL DECIDE WHEN COVID-19 IS ENDEMIC?

Most wealthy countries will probably make that decision themselves depending on how the virus is circulating within their borders and on the potential for new cases to cause big outbreaks. The COVID-19 vaccines, medicines and other measures widely available in rich countries will likely help them curb outbreaks long before the virus is brought under control globally.

The WHO does not technically declare pandemics. Its highest alert level is a global health emergency, and COVID-19 has warranted that distinction since January 2020. The U.N. health agency has convened an expert committee every three months since then to reassess the situation.

It's likely the pandemic will be over when the WHO's experts declare that COVID-19 no longer qualifies as a global emergency, but the criteria for that decision are not precisely defined.

"It's somewhat a subjective judgment because it's not just about the number of cases. It's about severity and it's about impact," said Dr. Michael Ryan, the WHO's emergencies chief. Others have pointed out that designating COVID-19 as endemic is arguably a political question rather than a scientific one, and it speaks to how much disease and death national authorities and their citizens

are willing to tolerate.

WHAT IS SPAIN PROPOSING?

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said last week that falling death rates for COVID-19 suggest that it's time for European officials to start considering whether the disease should be considered endemic. That means Spanish officials would no longer need to record every COVID-19 infection and that people with symptoms would not necessarily be tested, but they would continue to be treated if they are sick. The proposal has been discussed with some EU officials, but no decisions have been made.

In October, the European Centre for Disease Preven-

tion and Control issued advice on how countries might transition to more routine surveillance of COVID-19 after the acute phase of the pandemic. Among its recommendations, the agency said countries should integrate their monitoring of the coronavirus with other diseases like flu and test a representative sample of COVID-19 cases, rather than attempting to test every person with symptoms. □



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Report on sexual abuse in German diocese faults retired pope

By **GEIR MOULSON** Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — A long-awaited report on sexual abuse in Germany's Munich diocese on Thursday faulted retired Pope Benedict XVI's handling of four cases when he was archbishop in the 1970s and 1980s. The law firm that drew up the report said Benedict strongly denies any wrongdoing. The findings were sure to reignite criticism of Benedict's record more than a decade after the first, and until Thursday only, known case involving him was made public.

The archdiocese commissioned the report from law firm Westpfahl Spilker Wastl nearly two years ago, with a mandate to look into abuse between 1945 and 2019 and whether church officials handled allegations correctly. The law firm examined church files and spoke to witnesses.

Church officials weren't informed of the results ahead of publication. The current archbishop — Cardinal Reinhard Marx, a prominent reformist ally of Pope Francis — was faulted in two cases.

Marx's predecessors include the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who served in Munich from 1977 to 1982 before becoming head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and later being elected pope. Benedict



gave extensive written testimony for the report.

"In a total of four cases, we came to the conclusion that the then-archbishop, Cardinal Ratzinger, can be accused of misconduct," said one of the report's authors, Martin Pusch.

Two of those cases, he said, involved perpetrators who offended while he was in office and were punished by the judicial system but were kept in pastoral work without express limits on what they were allowed to do. No action was ordered under canon law.

In a third case, a cleric who had been convicted by a court outside Germany was put into service in the Munich archdiocese and the circumstances speak

for Ratzinger having known of the priest's previous history, Pusch said.

When the church abuse scandal first flared in Germany in 2010, attention swirled around another case: that of a pedophile priest whose transfer to Munich to undergo therapy was approved under Ratzinger in 1980.

The priest was allowed to resume pastoral work, a decision that the church has said was made by a lower-ranking official without consulting the archbishop. In 1986, the priest received a suspended sentence for molesting a boy.

Another of the report's authors, Ulrich Wastl, said Benedict's claim not to have attended a meeting

in 1980 in which the priest's transfer to Munich was discussed lacks credibility.

"In all cases, Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI strictly denies any wrongdoing on his part," Pusch said, and the retired pontiff cites largely "lack of knowledge of the facts and a lack of relevance under canon and criminal law." But he added that the assertions of lack of knowledge were sometimes "hard to reconcile" with the contents of church files.

Matthias Katsch of Eckiger Tisch, a group representing German clergy abuse survivors, spoke of a "historic" moment. "This building of lies that was constructed here in Munich to protect Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope

Benedict, collapsed today," he told German news agency dpa.

"To us, this is not shocking news," SNAP, a network representing survivors of sex abuse by clergy, said in a statement. "Sadly, we see these unsavory actions and inactions surface years later after lengthy silence by church officials and painful memories harbored by victims."

Benedict's longtime secretary, Monsignor Georg Gaenswein, said the retired pope hadn't yet read the report but would in the coming days.

"The emeritus pope, as he repeated many times during the years of his pontificate, expresses his upset and shame at the abuse of minors committed by clerics, and expresses his personal closeness and his prayers to all the victims, some of whom he met during his apostolic journeys," Gaenswein said in a statement. Benedict retired in 2013. Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni said the Holy See wouldn't comment until it had read the report in full and could give the contents "careful and detailed examination."

Benedict's legacy as pope had already been colored by the global eruption in 2010 of the sex abuse scandal, although as a cardinal he was responsible for turning around the Vatican's approach to the issue. □

Stampede at religious ceremony in Liberia kills 29 people

By **JONATHAN PAYE-LAY-LEH** Associated Press
MONROVIA, Liberia (AP)

— At least 29 people in Liberia, including 11 children and a pregnant woman,

have died in a stampede of worshippers at a Christian ceremony in a densely populated area of the capital, Monrovia, officials said Thursday.

The stampede erupted when a gang of thugs armed with knives attacked some of the hundreds attending the ceremony at about 9 p.m. on Wednesday night, police spokesman Moses Carter told The Associated Press.

One person has been arrested, he said. The Rev. Abraham Kromah who was holding the ceremony and who runs a church in the

New Georgia township of Monrovia was also brought in for questioning about the incident, police said.

The bodies have been taken to the morgue of Redemption Hospital, close to where the incident occurred in a beach area called New Kru Town.

The Red Cross has erected tents near the site for families to come in with photos to identify the bodies of their loved ones.

Street gangs have become an increasing problem in Monrovia and other Liberian cities in recent years, according to residents.

Liberian President George Weah visited the scene Thursday and declared three days of national mourning.

"Moving forward," he said there should be regulations on how these ceremonies, which Liberians call crusades, are conducted. The measures, he said, should limit the number of people who can attend based on the size of the crusade grounds. Even though "we all are religious people," everyone should be willing to comply with these regulations for safety reasons, he added. □



Jokic has 49, triple-double as Nuggets edge Clippers in OT

By MIKE CRANSTON Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Nikola Jokic had 49 points, 14 rebounds and fed Aaron Gordon for a tiebreaking 3-pointer with 1.9 seconds left in overtime for his 10th assist, giving the Denver Nuggets a 130-128 victory over the Los Angeles Clippers on Wednesday night.

Jokic drew a double-team, then whipped a pass across the court into the left corner. Gordon made his fourth 3 of the game to give him 28 points and Jokic his third straight triple-double and 10th of the season.

"I knew the ball was going to come to me because Jok makes the right play, the right pass, even in pressure situations," Gordon said. "He put it on time and on target. All I had to do was catch and shoot."

Nuggets reserve Devon Reed came onto the floor after Gordon's basket and received a technical foul. After Luke Kennard hit the free throw, Reggie Jackson's long 3-pointer bounced off the glass and rim at the buzzer.

Monte Morris added 19 points, nine rebounds and nine assists as the Nuggets won for the third time in four games behind another masterful performance from Jokic.

"When he gets in the mode, nobody in the world can stop him," Morris said.

Ivica Zubac had a career-high 32 points and added



10 rebounds. Jackson, who grew up about an hour away in Colorado Springs, had 28 points and 12 assists while often blowing kisses to hecklers in the crowd after made baskets as the Clippers lost their second straight to kick off an NBA season-high, eight-game road trip.

"I love the hate," Jackson said.

A week after blowing a 25-point lead in the third quarter of a loss in Los Angeles, the Nuggets got their revenge by holding the Clippers without a field goal for 7 1/2 minutes in the third quarter while erasing a 15-point deficit.

It led to a frantic finish. After Will Barton's driving layup with 26 seconds left in regulation tied it for the Nuggets, the Clippers couldn't get a shot off before the 24-second clock expired. But Jokic's fadeaway at the

buzzer was an airball.

Jokic got an assist from his coach that may have kept him around for the finish.

His follow shot tied the game at 72 with 4:40 left in the third, but he immediately picked up a technical foul for barking at the referee under the basket. He began to charge at the official, but Michael Malone ran onto the court, restrained Jokic and he avoided a second technical.

"I was mad because he grabbed my leg when I was going up (for the shot)," Jokic said.

Jokic, who has complained that he doesn't get enough foul calls for much of the season, stayed in the game and finished 14 of 16 from the foul line. The Clippers took just 12 free throws.

The Nuggets played hours after making official the three-way trade in which

they acquired shooting guard Bryn Forbes from San Antonio. Injured players Bol Bol and P.J. Dozier went to Boston in the deal.

Dozier, a career 41.3% 3-point shooter, will give Denver needed outside shooting. He could play as soon as Friday.

The Nuggets needed him in the second quarter, when their maligned bench was on the floor at the start of the Clippers' 21-2 run. The spurt continued when the starters returned, as Jokic missed his first six shots of the period before his bucket cut it to 59-47 at halftime. The Clippers frustrated Jokic last week with constant double-teams. This time, Zubac went at him defensively, hitting 15 of 19 shots.

"I haven't had that much fun until before I came into the league," Zubac said. "But unfortunately we lost

the game."

TIP-INS

Clippers: F Marcus Morris Sr. (personal reasons) was a late scratch. ... Kennard (COVID-19) had seven points in his first game since Dec. 31.

Nuggets: Jamal Murray (knee surgery) and Michael Porter Jr. (back surgery) continued to ramp up their pregame shooting drills before the game. Both hope to return this season. ... G Austin Rivers (non-COVID illness) returned after a two-game absence.

KEY CHALLENGE

Zubac avoided fouling out with 1:02 left in regulation when the Clippers won a replay challenge. Zubac had been called for a foul on Jokic. The Nuggets won the ensuing jump ball and Jokic's driving layup tied it.

FORBES ON FRIDAY?

Malone was hesitant to confirm that Forbes would play Friday. The Nuggets thought they had a deal to send Bol to Detroit rescinded when Bol failed a physical.

"After what happened last week with trades, you never know what's going to happen," Malone said. "It's never an easy transition. Trade calls, physicals, and when you've involved three teams, you're also waiting on other people's timelines as well."

UP NEXT

Clippers: At Philadelphia on Friday night.

Nuggets: Host Memphis on Friday night. □

Johnson, Graham, Beck finalists for Salute to Service Award

By The Associated Press undefined

Chicago Bears tight end Jimmy Graham, Denver Broncos tight end/fullback Andrew Beck, and former Baltimore Ravens linebacker Jarret Johnson are finalists for the NFL's Salute to Service Award. The award recognizes people who demonstrated exceptional effort to honor and support members of the military community. It will be recognized on Feb. 10 at NFL Honors, when The Associated Press reveals its individual award winners for the 2021 season. "From advocacy and support to our currently serving military to ensuring our veterans successfully transition with

employment after their service as well as supporting military children, all three finalists for the 11th annual 'Salute to Service Award presented by USAA' should be recognized for their commitment to America's military community," said Vice Admiral (Retired) John Bird, USAA's senior vice president of military affairs. "We thank and deeply appreciate Jarret, Jimmy, and Andrew for joining USAA in always honoring and serving our military, veterans, and their families, and encourage all Americans to follow their lead in participating in acts of service and support for our military."

This season, NFL clubs nominated

coaches, active and retired players, team executives and personnel who best demonstrated support for the military community.

USAA will contribute \$25,000 in the award recipient's honor to the official aid societies representing each of the military branches. The NFL will match that donation, which will be donated to the award recipient's military charity of choice.

Last year's award recipient was Atlanta Falcons executive Steve Cannon. The mission of The Jimmy Graham Foundation is to provide life changing and impactful experiences through the freedom of flight. To recognize the accomplish-

ments and sacrifices of veterans, Graham takes veterans airborne in his two US Army aircraft restorations, a 1957 de Havilland Beaver and 1967 UH1 Iroquois "Huey" helicopter. He also provides flights for underprivileged youth as an introduction to aviation.

With the goal to employ veterans, Johnson recently partnered with a service-disabled Air Force veteran to start a Black Rifle Coffee franchise in Niceville, Florida. The franchise employs more than 40 veterans, active-duty servicemen and women, veterans' spouses and children of military members from all around the world. □

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Ralph Lauren unveils Team USA's opening Olympic uniforms

By **LEANNE ITALIE** Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Team USA's opening ceremony uniforms for the Beijing Olympics include some sneaky new warming technology, along with a handy front pouch and a cinch waist on anoraks in navy and white.

The jackets unveiled Thursday by official outfitter Ralph Lauren include a smart, honeycomb-like fabric layer built in that expands or contracts in response to temperature changes — all without the use of a battery or wired technology.

The assist by a company called Skyscape follows battery-powered cooling and heating tech the company used for some previ-



ous looks for the Tokyo Summer Olympics and the Pyeongchang Winter Games. Bobsledder Aja Evans, a

bronze medalist at Sochi and an alternate this time around, was pleased with the new gear that she

modeled for media at the Polo Ralph Lauren store in Soho downtown.

"This is my favorite look," said the three-time Olympian, who didn't medal at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games. "It feels good and can go from indoor to outdoor."

Female athletes will parade Feb. 4 at the start of the games in China wearing red boots and red fleece pants with predominantly navy jackets. The men's looks are mostly white. Both will be wearing navy knit beanies, and both get the large bonus pouch on the front of their jackets to go with roomy side pockets and graphic touches on sleeves.

Ralph Lauren went with navy for their gloves, and all athletes will be provided with masks to help guard against COVID-19. Team USA's paralympians will receive the same gear. The uniforms were made in the U.S. The team's closing ceremony looks in a buffalo plaid design were unveiled in October.

Evans, who competes in two-person bobsled, wasn't particularly nervous about

soon heading to China while the omicron variant still poses challenges. The host country has severely restricted spectators and taken other precautions.

"We test every other day within the sport of bobsled and when we get to Beijing, we'll be testing every single day," she said.

The 33-year-old Evans said she'll miss the camaraderie of Olympic Village life, exchanging Olympic pins, meeting fellow athletes from all over the world and attending events in other sports.

"This Olympic Village life will be a lot different than my previous Olympic Games. I know that, you know, with the COVID restrictions, there won't be as much interacting and mingling or even going to other events. That's going to be a bit disappointing and unfortunate. But the fact that the Olympic Games are going on is a blessing," she said.

Evans, from the south side of Chicago, grew up in track and field with Olympic hopes. At the urging of a college coach, she switched to bobsled after graduation. Though she lives in Atlanta, she returns to Chicago often to encourage other kids like her to reach for their dreams.

Vonetta Flowers is another reason Evans turned to bobsled. At the 2002 Winter Olympics, Flowers and driver Jill Bakken won the gold medal in the two-woman event. Flowers became the first African American woman to win a gold medal in the Winter Olympics.

"My journey through sports has shown me that my purpose is to help continue to inspire young women and children," said Evans, who is one of many African American athletes now in the sport. □

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